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Quakes can't shake railroad commissioner candidates' stances on fracking

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Becky Berger



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AUSTIN — Republican candidates for a post on Texas' oil and gas regulation board are reluctant to pin earthquakes rocking parts of North Texas on industry practices related to “fracking.”

Residents who have felt dozens of quakes where they used to be rare have raised concerns and criticized the Railroad Commission for responding slowly and sharing little information.

Scientists generally agree humans can cause noticeable earthquakes with deep wells such as those used to dispose of waste from hydraulic fracturing. Yet most candidates remain skeptical.

Two of the four GOP candidates for an open spot on the Railroad Commission, which regulates Texas' oil and gas industry, receive a major portion of their campaign cash from industry donors. Each said the donations would not affect their decisions on the panel. Two Democrats are also running.

Azle residents have increased pressure on the commission to halt drilling in the area or at least provide answers. Concerned residents recently rode buses to Austin to protest what they perceive as the commission's neglect of the issue. The commission responded by hiring a seismologist to investigate the phenomenon but stopped short of linking the tremors to disposal wells.

Republican candidate Malachi Boyuls, an oil and gas business owner from Dallas, is skeptical of a link.

"I haven't seen any evidence. So I'm not entirely sure what is the cause, and I'm not sure anybody is entirely sure what the cause of the activity is," Boyuls said.

More than half the money noted in Boyuls' latest finance report was donated by entities related to the oil and gas industry. Boyuls said the money wouldn't influence him as a commissioner.

"The industry doesn't elect me; the people of Texas elect me," Boyuls said.

The candidates' stance on the quakes underscores the importance of fracking to the industry and the state's economy. The practice has ushered in an energy renaissance in Texas and nationwide, filled the state's coffers through taxes on drilling, and contributed to nation-leading job creation.

A 2013 study by geophysicists, seismologists and the National Research Council reports humans can, and have, induced seismic activity.

Cliff Frohlich, a seismologist and associate director of the Institute for Geophysics at the University of Texas at Austin, said the link between humans and quakes is nothing new.

"This has been established since the 1960s and known since the 1940s," Frohlich said.

The quakes rumbling Texas generally shake homes but haven't caused widespread property damage.

Most of the tens of thousands of disposal wells in the state do not cause earthquakes, but a strong case can be made for quakes in certain areas, such as those near Azle and Cleburne, which are near high-volume injection wells, Frohlich said.

He added that disposal wells, not fracking, can trigger quakes, so the industry "has options" for changing how it deals with the issue.

Houston area Republican candidate Ryan Sitton, an industry engineer and business owner, said he hasn't seen any research to suggest disposal wells are related to earthquakes.

Nearly half of the funds donated to Sitton in the latter half of 2013 came from donors related to the oil and gas industry, state records show. Sitton said the industry dominates donations to candidates because it wants superior candidates and consistent regulation.

"They don't want to see bad actors give the entire industry a bad name," he said. "When you consider the volume of earth that is affected in a disposal well and in a frack job and the pressures that we are talking about, it seems highly unlikely that those are having a direct impact on seismic activity."

Candidate Wayne Christian, a former East Texas House member, said the commission's first obligation is to protect people, but it first must find the problem.

“We don’t need an answer in search of a problem,” he said.

Christian received most of his campaign cash from a single timber industry executive. Another large chunk came from businesses related to the oil and gas industry, and his treasurer loaned the campaign \$1 million, according to state reports.

Republican candidate Becky Berger, an industry geologist from Schulenburg who’s running for the second time, said the links between disposal wells and quakes is speculative and the disposal wells are in places already likely to have earthquakes.

“Scientists really like to be on top of whatever the news media is all excited about right now, and panic is always a good thing to sell newspapers and get people to watch your TV show,” Berger said. She had less than \$50,000 in campaign cash on hand in her last campaign report, with donations largely from ranchers.

Democrat Steve Brown, running a minimally funded campaign, is the only candidate so far to connect disposal wells and quakes and call for a halt to drilling in affected sites.

“I am astonished that I am the only candidate to take that position,” said Brown, who faces Dale Henry of Austin in the Democratic primary.

Azle Mayor Alan Brundrett has felt the tremors firsthand — one during a City Council meeting. Another tremor caught him as he sat in his recliner one night.

“I thought it was an explosion at first, until I realized it was an earthquake,” he said.

Brundrett said he doesn’t understand the reluctance to link wells to quakes when literature on the subject, available on the U.S. Geological Survey’s website, clearly connects the two.

After Brundrett complained to the Railroad Commission, Commissioner David Porter, a Republican, attended a town-hall meeting on the earthquakes, and the panel hired a seismologist to study the phenomenon.

Brundrett said the quick public response was unexpected.

“I guess my standards of that entity were so low that they did actually surprise me,” Brundrett said.

AT A GLANCE: Some donations

A sampling of large donations to GOP railroad commissioner candidates from those in the oil and gas industry: (Candidate Becky Berger’s donations are mostly from ranchers.)

MALACHI BOYULS

\$67,500 from Jason Hoisager, Arabella Petroleum

\$25,000 from Trevor Rees-Jones, Chief Oil and Gas

\$25,000 from Kelcy Warren, Energy Transfer Partners

WAYNE CHRISTIAN

\$25,000 from Chris Cooper, Oilfield Water Lines LP

RYAN SITTON

\$25,000 from Donald Martin, Competitive Engineering Inc.

\$25,000 from Maximo Tejeda, Tejas Tubular

\$20,000 from J.L. Davis, West Texas Gas

SOURCE: Texas Ethics Commission